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# Ecological Grief and Anthropocene Horror

Timothy Clark

*"Today every question is already the question of everything" (Maurice Blanchot).*

This paper contrasts what it schematizes as "ecological grief" with a broader, more common but conceptually elusive phenomenon of "Anthropocene horror." Ecological grief was described in this issue's call for papers as "an emotional experience brought on by the actual or anticipated loss of cherished natural spaces, ecosystems, species, etc. caused by environmental change" (see Cunsolo and Ellis, 2018). For the purposes of this exercise I take "ecological grief" to be grief for the loss or threatened destruction of a *specific* landscape, place or species, as opposed to what might be called "Anthropocene horror." This phrase is used to name a sense of horror about the changing environment globally, usually as mediated by news reports and expert predictions, giving a sense of threats that need not be anchored to any particular place, but which are both everywhere and anywhere. "Anthropocene horror" is something familiar to environmental activists of various kinds but which is now being experienced

by an increasing portion of the world population. This paper tries to articulate some of its most striking features.

In an earlier study I suggested a concept of “Anthropocene disorder.”<sup>1</sup> My sketch of “Anthropocene horror” essentially reiterates that argument, but with the phrase altered to stress the affective aspects of the condition, especially its sense of powerlessness, in accordance with the overall focus of this issue of *American Imago*. The global environmental crisis (usually loosely called the “Anthropocene”), is being experienced as a source of many different affects for different people and contexts. Nevertheless, an emergent sense of “Anthropocene horror” (henceforth AH) seems distinctive enough for it to be worth trying to delineate as a specific affective spectrum, even if experience on that spectrum ranges from one of intense despair about the future, at its most extreme, to a mere sense of unease, or even affects associated with denial. All these are variously felt by various people, or even by the same person at different times.<sup>2</sup>

AH is being lived as a pervasive affect in daily life, not as an easily compartmentalised emotion. It need not be a response to some obviously perceptible assault on the natural environment, but may even or perhaps especially affect someone living in and surrounded by a “developed”

infrastructure. “Grief” may still suggest a lack of implication in the loss, but “horror” is more appropriate when part of the sadness at issue is from living in a context of latent environmental violence and feeling personally trapped in its wrongs.

Intense ecological grief and its attendant identity crises tend to be suffered by people who are the most vulnerable to environmental change for reasons of poverty, social status or mode of livelihood. In a paper subtitled “Understanding Ecological grief” Neville Ellis and Ashlee Cunsolo refer to the forms of grief undergone by people in the far north of Canada and in the Western Australian wheat belt, both facing severe impoverishment and a collapse of their way of life as a result of climate change (Cunsolo and Ellis, 2014). Attending this derangement of old norms and dependencies is a proliferation of anxiety disorders, and what has been described as a paradoxical kind of PTSD in advance (Grose, 2019). AH, on the other hand, may already affect anyone anywhere. As an affect in everyday life, AH is by far the more complex and conceptually elusive of the two states, and clearly the less immediately painful.

The context of AH is even that of a certain lack of realizable feeling. Henri Lefèbvre criticizes the loose way modern people continually mistake

basic reality: “the conflation of the terms “planet,” “earth,” “worldwide,” “world” and “universe” is [...] rather ridiculous” (Lefèbvre, 1995, 254).

Lefèbvre was writing in the early 1960s, but this point about the weakness of our conceptions can read even more provocatively in the twenty-first century. It underlines the fact that we have no immediate felt sense of the earth as a finite planet in our basic constitution or perception. Unlike our sense of distance in those realms we can see, hear or walk through, that the earth is a finite totality is something we learn about in growing up (and a few people even now do not credit it).

This lack of any earth-sense will not have mattered in the days of sailing ships and horse-power, but it is now become, more or less by accident, a possibly fatal human flaw. It renders us vulnerable to all the social, cultural and economic pressures that constitute, effectively, a daily life geared to climate change denial. There is a dangerous mismatch between the dynamics of individual personhood and the contemporary context. David Wood writes:

Our palette of affective responses is the product of evolutionary history, in which individual and group reproductive success and survival have been the selective mechanisms. But the circumstances

in which our passions organize themselves to promote survival and flourishing have changed. (Wood, 2019, p. 126)

This affective mismatch is the assumed context for numerous eco-philosophical projects whose primary aim is to help create a felt sense of the human defined in relation to the earth. For example, Clive Hamilton argues for a new “deep, pre-ethical sense of responsibility” gauged to the fragility of the earth (Hamilton, 2017, p. 149), one which “cannot belong to the individual or to the citizen of a nation ... but to the human who *feels* the inescapable responsibility that comes with the unique and extraordinary place of humankind on planet Earth” (Hamilton, 2017, p. 149; emphasis added). Wood writes: “[My] book is indeed in many ways an attempt at the performative constitution of a species-subject” (Wood, 2019, p. 35). Numerous other thinkers see their work as contributing to this same project. To induce this subjective condition is a major ethical project of the environmental humanities, accompanying critiques of the rapacity of global capitalism.

A feeling or an identity which needs to be constructed and argued for is clearly one that barely already exists, however strongly ecocritics like

myself try to imagine that we possess it. On the other hand, “ecological grief” in an immediate sense is becoming a common experience, and seems even too tame a phrase to cover the experience of people across the world suffering from an increasing number of climate-related disasters, such as fierce cyclones or more intense periods of drought.

When the context is the immediately perceptible damage wrought by the government or some specific capitalist development, ecological grief can be structured as a simple dichotomy of bereft human and lost creature or place, and it can support fairly clearly-cut kinds of local environmental politics in which the antagonists are both defined and understood. This was the stance of many earlier, “first wave” ecocritics and innumerable environmental activists campaigning on a specific issue—the stance celebrated in Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), for instance. It can be a politically energizing and powerful source of anger and possible change. Such grief can also be called “ecological” in the very loose sense of affirming, by implication, a seeming norm or condition of things undamaged or less damaged by human interference. In that sense the feeling of pain has been argued to have an ethically normative element, one that makes it also an affirmation of value, even in loss.

This was often the normative concept of such grief at work in texts of so-called “eco-psychology”. There is a long tradition, reaching back to Romantic period literature, for which the hurt of environmental loss is also testimony to a supposedly deeper sense of the human as “in touch with/at one with nature” or to a more “natural” human being. Thus, ecological grief could be argued to question individualistic and instrumentalist notions of personhood for which relations with the environment are understood primarily in consumerist terms of the supply and demand of basic material needs, and with the very idea of a person “increasingly identified [solely] with internal experiences dissociated from the world itself”(Kidner, 2001, p.49). Modern psychology, Kidner writes, “has failed to foster a realistic awareness of our place in the natural world, but rather ... it has *actively* contributed to the construction and legitimation of a form of personhood that is inherently hostile to nature” (Kidner, 2001, p.51) Kidner writes of the assumed “private” and “inward” nature of personal identity according to dominant, popular Western conceptions:

As we move “inward,” so we approach a realm that is more and more intensely personal and that has less and less to do with the “external context” of our lives. For us, personal identity resides in this detachment from the world, in the ease with which we can distinguish



ourselves from the world. And our way of life reflects this distancing: we strive to control, predict, master what is outside us, minimizing any resonances between the self and natural patterns in the “environment,” and downplaying the significance of those patterns that exist in the world. (Kidner, 2001, p. 172).

“Ecological grief,” on this reading, would become the most intense realization of the underlying but often unfelt alienation and repressions of modern personhood. At the same time the romantic streak in eco-psychology, idealizing “ecological grief” as the pain of some more “natural” humanity, would need to be resisted. Studies of prehistory and of numerous historical civilizations suggest that the destructive and exploitative have always characterized the human species and its hominin ancestors. Grief felt at the spectacle of environmental violence may be deep, but it is barely “ecological” as the token of some “natural” humanity waiting to be restored. 3

### **AH: The Inchoate and Unprecedented**

Ecological grief at the loss or destruction of particular place is an emotion felt personally, as an affront to those who valued that place, creature or ecosystem: it has the sense of a personal assault. AH is often less

individualizing in that sense, being horror at a shared prospect, which is felt less as an affront to “me” in particular, than a sense of social malaise, like widespread social and political failure. Given that its concern embraces the whole earth, its anger may drift into a resigned paralysis. Wood writes:

in the absence of obviously available forms of collective agency, a whole range of public responses – resignation, anger, apathy, *ressentiment* – are entirely understandable. (They are plausible responses both to local political failure and to the seemingly intractable prospect of serious climate change.) (Wood, 2019, p. 131)

Relevant here is the broad academic consensus on differentiating concepts of “affect” from concepts of “emotion.” The former is a “precognitive bodily feeling”, while the emotions are distinguished as “consciously interpreted or narrated affects”. That is, they are feelings that have become articulate in language, and, perhaps, also in politics or action (see Bladow and Ladino, 2018, p. 5). Ecological grief is clearly an “emotion” in this sense, ripe to be weaponized in environmental politics. AH, on the other hand, remains for many a present but subdued and barely realized affect, a background unease to be met even by indifference or denial. This is a long way from what Sianne Ngai has called “the classical

political passion—feelings like anger, grief, and love.” (Ngai, 2005, p. 5). To transmute this affective background into forms of politically motivating passion, remains the work of people busy in green politics of various kinds.

When realized at its clearest AH is a felt response to an understanding that human impacts have passed a threshold at which what was once just taken for granted in daily life has crossed over from the normal to the destructive. This means that, say, the sight of a busy road or a large field of crops, or, for many, even a government paper extolling “increased growth,” can induce as real a feeling of horror as the sight of a felled forest or plastic-choked waterway. Much that was recently normal transmutes, without any alteration in its separate make-up, into something latently violent. Daily life can feel on the way to being a personal realization of a form of Salvador Dali’s paranoiac-critical method, his technique of working out of a deliberately induced state of paranoia in which one’s surroundings seem the expression of malign forces on the attack (see Finkelstein, 1996). At the same time, someone suffering badly from AH is bound to seem “unbalanced” from the viewpoint of others in “normal” life, as most environmental activists know only too well.

Clive Hamilton expresses a sense of AH when he highlights the intensely felt inadequacy of inherited ethical thinking when faced with a newly realized sense of derangement to the workings of the Earth System, that “An ethical framework that can tell us whether it is wrong to overstate our travel expenses cannot tell us whether it is wrong to change the Earth’s geological history” (Hamilton, 2017, p. 148). Hamilton continues:

When we step back and survey the epoch-stopping force of anthropogenic climate change and mass extinctions our established ethical categories and legal principles appear banal and feeble. If the human impact has been so powerful that it has deflected the Earth from its natural geological path, describing the state of affairs as “unethical” or “unlawful” seem to be some kind of category error. (Hamilton, 2017, p. 148)

Merely given ethical language “risks normalizing an event without parallel, ... rendering prosaic a transition that is in fact Earth-shattering” (Hamilton, 2017, pp.148-149). Compare Matthias Frisch on our duties to future generations: “constituting a new and different world in which future people will live, many of the large-scale actions that present generations engage in, it seems, are *beyond inherited moral notions*” (Frisch, 2018, p. 37;

(emphasis added). Hamilton concludes: “So I think we have to confront the most difficult truth – in the Anthropocene we have no ethical resources to draw on” (Hamilton, 2017, p. 155).

The “Anthropocene” demands a new awareness, beyond given ethics, of what might be called the *“pre-ethical”* dimension of life as that which is now at stake. This means something beyond the ethical in the sense of inherited norms of behavior, namely, the very condition of possibility for such norms in the once taken-for-granted background workings of what scientists call the Earth System, with its various climatic and environmental thresholds in terms of the carbon and nitrogen cycles, biodiversity levels and so on. Wood describes “our assumption that human life will continue into the foreseeable future ... [,] [as] a horizon that gives our own lives meaning” (Wood, 2019, p. 71). Yet it is the depth of this very assumption that now makes it also so dangerously taken-for-granted, enabling such things as the irrationality of climate change denial.

This taken-for-granted horizon is precisely what risks being elided or overlooked in the fact that we have no direct perception or sense of the earth as a finite planet in our basic sensorium. Frighteningly, it is because the Earth System thresholds at issue are so fundamental that they are also

so deeply presupposed, taken-for-granted, overlooked (as in the confused categories highlighted by Lefèbvre), or their fragility denied. Wood is effectively writing of this possibly fatal absence when he writes:

One explanation of why we are not addressing future climate catastrophe might well be that addressing it threatens the future horizon at any level we can make sense of. We can at best contemplate action within such fundamental frames. The idea that the horizon itself is in question is simply impossible to accept. (Wood, 2019, p. 70)

AH is then most often a feeling of inadequacy, of being the target of ethical demands that exceed anything one could do in combating global environmental wrongs, and, more worryingly, a realization of the incongruously anachronistic nature of given ethical discourse.

At issue is a condition of *closure*, after the sense of Jacques Derrida's well-known use of the term ("the closure of metaphysics"). Closure does not mean "end" here: it means a sense of known entrapment within the repetition of conceptual, ethical social and political assumptions and structures which seem both unavoidable but also known to be environmentally destructive and intellectually anachronistic. This can induce a fatalistic sense of a zombification of human life, both with the

spectacle of the destructively self-perpetuating dynamics of international capitalism and in the becoming- destructive of so much once seemingly indifferent human behavior.

AH entails a feeling of entrapment. One of the traditional functions of the concept of nature was to name a space of supposed externality, not the other of “culture”, but more literally its outside. But as Wood writes:

Now there is no outside, no space for expansion, no more *terra nullius*, no *Lebensraum* no slack, no “out” or “away” as when we throw something “out” or “away”. .... Yet so much of our making sense, let alone the intelligibility of our actions, still rests on being able to export, exclude, externalize what we do not want to consider.

When that externality is no longer available, we are in trouble. (Wood, 2005, pp. 172-173).

The end of “externality” means that the consequences of human action do not go away any more. To stand on a remote mountain top is effectively still to breathe the atmosphere of overwhelming numbers of other people.

The claustrophobic feeling of AH has, ironically perhaps, been unwittingly intensified by the impact of work in the environmental humanities. Its work has often been to analyze and demonstrate how

deeply elements of culture that may once have seemed quite separate are in fact implicated in environmental violence – the politics and psychology of notions of private property, for instance, or various forms of gender or of identity politics, or the implication of consumerism in the loss of rain forests to vast palm oil plantations. Environmental violence, however latent, is thus being read as inhabiting more and more of what earlier may have naively seemed at least ecologically indifferent, and such forms of awareness enter culture more broadly. For an intellectual or an activist these insights can be illuminating and helpful, for others it may seem like contamination, or inducing a kind of ethical claustrophobia. Is a recoil from this even part of the current spectacle of an appalling right-wing politics in the USA or Brazil, with leaderships for whom cutting down the Amazon forest or mining a national park gets touted as a gesture of libertarian freedom?

### **The “Panic Question”**

I turn now to the experience of AH at its sharpest and least entangled in denial, the kind of experience undergone by people most attuned to so-called “green issues”, even without the grief of environmental loss in their immediate context. Here AH is becoming the kind of crisis best known to some thinking in existential philosophy.



A reference suggests itself here to Martin Heidegger's distinction between "fear" and "anxiety" (see Elpidorou and Freeman (2010)). Fear concerns a specific object in the world, whereas anxiety concerns no specific object within the world, but relates to "the whole horizon of this being-in-the-world". Gregers Andersen uses just a such distinction to outline the uncertainly anxious modes of being addressed in some so-called cli-fi literature, such as Helen Simpson's short story "Diary of an Interesting Year" set in a future of collapsing norms and broken infrastructure (Simpson, 2011, pp. 116-128) (Andersen, 2016). Likewise, whereas environmental grief is a response to specific loss, AH is a more diffuse, an ineradicable but not specifically locatable concern with the horizon of our being-in the-world itself.

Michel Haar writes: "Anxiety makes the subject no longer know *who* it is. It takes part in its own "wild" deconstruction, if one can put it that way. This "one" is no longer a subject but an indeterminate presence which feels invaded by a feeling of uncanniness" (Haar, 1993, p. 45). Such Heideggerian anxiety has a broad catalyst now in that the global environmental crisis is also a crisis of human agency. For, despite the "Anthropocene" nickname, the supposed emergence of humanity as a pseudo-geological force is not the manifestation of deliberate human

agency, but of a realm of unintended consequences in the Earth System, one in which “humanity” is felt to become weirdly impersonalized, the total effect of its actions disjunct from the plans or aims of individual people or nations. My personal desires, ideals, and ambitions, the realization of my “self” etc., do not register here, but merely the physical side-effects of my bodily existence and its various material impacts. The horror being felt is one of mocking disjunctions, of the lack of felt connections between, for instance, individual actions and collective effects, between how a landscape or a forest appears and what is actually happening to it because of carbon emissions on other continents, between a benign reality on one time-scale and catastrophe on another. The sense of panic in relation to what may effectively have already happened is a kind of unanchoring or dislocation of the customary relation between emotion and its object.

Being trapped in a context which is unprecedented, complex, and at work over challenging scales of space and time, AH resists being assimilated to any simple narrative. One pertinent distinction between affects and emotions is that, in Pieter Vermeulen’s words: “While emotions are linked to cognition and meaning and are structured narratively, affects are intractable intensities that escape from cognitive or semantic determination” (Vermeulen, 2012, p. 557). AH, analogously, entails a

sense of dislocation from “normal life” that can induce feelings of the senseless, incoherent or ridiculous—but “the ridiculous” becomes here a free floating quality, uncertain as to whether it is affixed solely to feelings of such dislocation, or to the whole “normal” context itself, or only to one’s own dislocated sense in not knowing truly how to respond.

Maurice Blanchot’s *The Infinite Conversation* (originally published 1969) describes what he terms the “panic experience”. Its formal outline is that of a challenge to received norms of thought, politics, or ethics, of a disorienting resistance to assimilation or categorization. The “panic question”, as a form of existential crisis, is not just the uncontainable questioning of everything, as when a questioner goes on repeating “why?,” but it is experienced as a blanking out of one’s own subjectivity and singular identity, as if having become no-one/anyone in a panicked crowd

This dimension of the profound question ... this panic relation whereby it questions everything by way of what would be outside of everything, questioning the “world” by way of a “non-world” where the question no longer has a question’s value, dignity or power, is not at all exceptional. On the contrary, it is constant; it simply slips away. ... In all the great movements in which we exist only as interchangeable

signs, the panic question is there, designating us as anyone at all, and depriving us of all power to question. In a crowd our being is that of flight. (Blanchot, 1993, p. 19)

The affinity of AH to Blanchot's "panic question" lies in the fact that AH is not simply a sense of the threats to specific places, creatures or modes of life. It correlates, at a deeper level, with the previously taken-for-granted working of the Earth System, something effectively both material and transcendental at the same time, as the general condition of possibility for current life. The "panic" effect lies in the sense both of the depth and opacity of this realm, and its overwhelming of any sense of individual relevance or capability in gauging the causes or rationality of the panic.

Blanchot seems prophetic of a growing condition, felt in the dislocations and derealizations of AH as akin to such a "panic experience": "when we ask the question: who has been the subject of this experience? This question is already perhaps an answer... an indefinite "who?" (Blanchot, quoted in Derrida, 1995, p. 276).

To highlight the unprecedented nature of AH here, one might compare it to a well-known argument about the nature of what is "ethical." AH seems to be a response to the undecidable, the incalculable. It is here that

Jacques Derrida's skeptical approach to general ethical theory might seem most pertinent, as it relates precisely to that which one cannot decide by given norms. In fact, however, in the context of AH Derrida's argument now seems disconcerting partial or anachronistic. For Derrida the ethical is not genuinely understood as a set of inherited norms to be followed: the ethical intrudes upon us most directly rather as that area, undecidable by general rule, in which singular claims or cases are still in need of decision one way or another. Geoffrey Bennington sums up:

If [ethical] "decision" simply meant the expression of my subjective will, then it would be no decision at all, but again, in a different register, the mere application of given possibilities to a situation which consists precisely in a certain challenge to what is merely possible [in the sense of already latent in my nature]. (Bennington, 2000, p. 73)

I find that AH is distinctive in that it is experienced as effectively an inversion of what Derrida's argument describes. The latter seems driven more by the idea of what is *free* as a decision —undetermined, not calculable etc. – rather than what is ethical about it. Surely, in many cases what is ethical as a decision is also boringly obvious and drearily mundane

– for example, not poisoning the air, not generating more cfc, not buying a car, etc. All are obviously “ethical” while being not at all demanding in terms of which decision would be better. The difficulty now, the incipient horror, is not the undecidability of the specific case –for example, I already know it would be irresponsible to take up a conference invitation that entails flying to China. At issue is not the ethical ordeal of being unable to reach a decision, but the panic inherent in that decision having no decisiveness.

If, for example, my own “greener lifestyle” can have significance only if innumerable other people are pursuing something similar, then my own actions cannot but drift toward being a kind of performance of virtue only, simulative. In the face of AH, Derrida’s stress on what makes a decision free, i.e. undetermined, entails a latent even individualistic focus on the decision-maker, disregarding a context that already erodes beyond recognition notions of individual responsibility and ethical efficacy.<sup>4</sup>

The so-called Anthropocene is horrifying as the manifestation of an evident and destructive rift between the facts of what humanity is or has become, and this norm of individuals living as rational agents pursuing known and coherent purposes or decisions. The latently individualistic focus of Derrida’s notion of an “ethical decision” now seems likewise anachronistic.

A new kind of irony pervades things, skewing the act from the intention and the consequence from the ambition. At the same time, we have lived for so long with variously frightening possible futures, that even emerging news on vast swathes of the arctic being in flame has an insidious sense of *déjà vu* and the inevitable, so its resistance to being felt slides easily into being effectively a form of denial. It can also be a feeling of intense panic, yet it can seem like the grief of a bereavement, a useless panic at what has already happened.

### **AH and Simulative Affect**

An account of AH as a kind of existential crisis might ring true for an increasing number of people, but it must now be fully acknowledged that the kinds of threat and dislocation described are barely felt at all by most people in the affairs of day to day life, however deeply those are ultimately at stake, whether these are the routine lives of the prosperous or the day to day stresses of material poverty.

Ingolfur Blühdorn has theorized a general becoming simulative of environmental politics within the contexts of late capitalism (Blühdorn, 2007). Environmentalism is hollowed out from within by various material and psychological pressures toward becoming the partially pretended or

gesture politics of a context whose basic commitment is still to the intellectual and material comforts of the status quo, given the power and inertia of capitalism and consumer democracy. It would be simplistic to read what Blühdorn describes in terms of personal hypocrisies, for his topic is the deep and pervasively reifying effects of late consumerist capitalism.

It would often be more appropriate then also to write “A~~H~~” with legible deletion marks. The deletion denotes the usually simulative nature of A~~H~~. These signify that what is being described is also pervasive in or as its not being felt, as an inherently self-divided attunement to an alarming reality that is both known and under-realized, or an affect not yet focused as any one specific emotion. It corresponds also to the way in which catastrophe is deflected into modes of entertainment in innumerable dystopian films and novels. A~~H~~ is both a feeling and the intimated sense that more ought to be felt, hence it is also a disorientation and an unfocused guilt. It is in its not being felt that A~~H~~ is often at its most horrifying. When the affect attains the focused sharpness of an articulate emotion, it is emotion of a non-cathartic kind, both because it cannot be assuaged and because it is often barely there.

There is also a purely mathematical factor at work in the general becoming-simulative - the depersonalizing and derealizing power of mere



scale effects, of the psychology, if that is still the word, of being embedded in the impersonal dynamics of very large numbers, their effect less of “divide and rule” than of “multiply-and-neutralize,” underlining the felt insignificance of any and every single act or intention.

AH, realized at its more intense, is the sense that much even authentic environmental politics and action is also “simulative” in another sense: of being policies, thinking, and actions that are genuinely held or performed but that are simultaneously known to be inadequate, rendering them strangely hollow or imitation. Yet, precisely because the accompanying panic involves so much, it also dissolves, loses all contour and blurs into ~~panic~~, the deletion marking the fact that the panic is there, but usually as suppressed, even barely felt, also simulative. The horror latent in AH is to hear the question that seems to survive any response to it: “how to get real?” – and then, necessarily, to do something else.

Is it my merely personal affliction with AH that sometimes makes academic ecocriticism, as it becomes more mainstream, also seem largely or merely simulative, embedded as it is in the turn-over of the late-capitalist university, and with critics rather too content with the unchallenging aim of addressing what they loosely term the “cultural imaginary” through the championing of new readings of literary texts? The

intellectually (at least) exciting challenges of representing an “Anthropocene” have reinvigorated criticism, especially of the formal and ethical limits or capacities of the novel, but does the environmental crisis risk just becoming the latest occasion for the self-perpetuation of a given academic culture – with, for example, its supposedly prestigious but environmentally irresponsible international conferences?

In some ways the spectrum of affect that can be labeled AH recalls some of the topics and tropes associated with postmodernism in the late 1980 and early 1990s. At issue is a sliding indistinction of authentic and inauthentic emotion, concern and fake concern, action or its mere simulation. Here, however, the challenge to given notions of authentic self-present subjectivity is not solely from the effects of consumer capitalism, with its contaminations of identity and commodity, and so on, but from more obscure scenarios of material entrapment and closure, for which the major issue is the depersonalizing contamination of human and nonhuman agency (“We live in the age of unintended consequences” (Ulrich Beck) (Beck, 1999, p. 119).

## **Working through Grief and Horror**

Blühdorn argues that environmental thinkers need to confront the implications of the fact that “what eco-political discourse is, ultimately, all about, *are limits of social acceptability*, that is, concerns about violations of established social norms that are deemed unacceptable” (Blühdorn, 2015, p. 159). Objective data about collapsing ice shelves, disappearing species and future droughts do not “matter” in themselves any more than another bare fact, such as the size of a hill or the shape of a cloud. These data will matter to people only as they impinge upon and are seen to be “in conflict with, established social values, expectations and aspirations” (Blühdorn, 2015, p. 159). Blühdorn highlights here the burning frustration and injustice felt by so many environmental activists, that, to most people in the developed world, even the threat of environmental collapse still makes less impact on their thinking than the cost of running a car.

Yet is this now shifting? There may be a more activating and potentially more positive side of AH. Its feeling of the unprecedented is become also witness to a growing crisis of legitimation as to such “established values, expectations and aspirations.” In the recent past, protests about environmental changes have become often more general but more vehement, focused less on some specific place or species under threat but on a different and on a refreshingly specific human target—on central

governments. It is the very authority of central governments that is increasingly felt as simulative, a shift both exciting and potentially dangerous. Paul Leduc Browne writes: “Like money, which is worthless if no one believes in it, the state only exists as long as it receives at least the tacit support of a sufficient portion of the population over which it rules...” (Browne, 2018, p. 443).

This crisis of legitimacy makes itself felt in an increasing public dissatisfaction with mainstream “green” arguments – those that run along the familiar lines of how each individual can really make a difference by, say, using a different kind of car, eating less or no meat, and so on. A sense of individual powerlessness or insignificance in relation to such measures is certainly part of the feeling of AH – the powerlessness to make a difference individually. However, something that environmental thinkers have known for a long time is becoming a powerful element in broader public consciousness: the realization of how far such prescriptions, however valid in some ways, are also disingenuous, a displacing of responsibilities that must lie predominantly with the state. Browne observes: “Beyond campaigns designed to pressure states and corporations to change their behavior, there is a very limited potential for autonomous popular organization to change how resources are extracted,

goods manufactured, people and commodities transported.” (Browne, 2018, p. 447).

A crisis of legitimacy is being felt as a matter of the state, not of the individual. The partial transmutation of AH into politicized anger takes the often simple, even simplistic form of a refusal of the status quo, at least for the duration of a staged demonstration. A member of “Extinction Rebellion,” involved in blocking off roads in major cities in the UK stated: “We’ve all read the science, we know the story, the whole phase of denial is over and if it takes civil disobedience to make a difference then so be it” (quoted in Blackall, 2019).

A vague, pervasive sense of “tipping points” has the effect of making even the trivial seemingly tinged with risks, of heightening the stakes of day to day actions, sometimes almost to absurdity. A general loss of proportion even infects day to day life; the rational and the paranoiac blur into each other. The malaise of AH sharpens more often into some specific emotions: anger, even rage, fear, a loathing of government. The challenge becomes to make something precisely aimed, thoughtful and genuinely mitigating in effect from such inchoate emotions.

A future danger must be a reactive retreat into too exclusive a concern with the narrowest forms of identity politics. Scott Hamilton writes:

“When groups feel threatened”, notes Amy Chua, commenting on the surge of identity politics in the USA after the 2016 election of President Donald Trump, “they retreat into tribalism.” What we see in recent racist and populist calls for “culture” and/or nationalism, therefore, is the political future of the Anthropocene contained today within the domestic framework of the “I.” (Hamilton, 2019).

As opposed to this reactionary drift, the environmental crisis has also given rise to a startling new form of inter-generational politics. Eleanor Salter writes in the *Independent* newspaper for 11<sup>th</sup> July 2019: “Young people have been mobilizing to force *climate justice* onto the agenda because the established political order has failed to rise to the climate challenge” (Salter, 2019). It may be that the difference of generations is set to replace even issues of gender as the most prominent catalyst of the age for political activism.

Such a transmutation of AH into a more active, morally satisfying political anger is necessarily simplistic, given the complexities of all the social, political cultural, ecological and other issues (such as the near-

overwhelming fact that the agent of the Anthropocene is no one human entity at all, but a complex assemblage of human and nonhuman factors on differing scales). The risk is that the most likely response to intensifying activism will be social breakdown followed by authoritarian repression. Nevertheless, it is also a disorienting chance to induce the dismantling of current norms of economics and politics.

## Notes

1 I refer to my *Ecocriticism on Edge* (2015). The phrase “Anthropocene disorder” was coined:

to name a new kind of psychic disorder, inherent in the mismatch between familiar day-to-day perception and the sneering voice of even a minimal ecological understanding or awareness of scale effects; and in the gap between the human sense of time and slow-motion catastrophe; and, finally, in a sense of disjunction between the destructive processes at issue and the adequacy of the arguments and measures being urged to address them. In response, the mind is suspended, uncertainly, between a sense of rage and even despair on one side, and a consciousness of the majority

perception of such reactions as disproportionate and imbalanced on the other. (p. 140)

2 An intellectual focus on the issue of affect is timely, as it is now realized that the dominant aims of much environmental work have rested on a one-dimensional, rather naïve understanding of the way feeling and affect are forces of political motivation: the realization that environmental problems cannot be understood simply in terms of some public information deficit waiting to be filled—that if most people knew more they would act differently--or even, *pace* some ecocriticism, that the global problem can be read as a failure of the social imagination that could be partly assuaged by celebrating the latest “cli fi” book or ecopoem, or by advocating some alternative ontology.

3 Contrast the romanticism of some early ecocriticism. In a seminal anthology Neil Everden endorsed the supposedly ecological ethics implicit in something Northrop Frye wrote about art, “that the goal of art is to “recapture, in full consciousness, that original lost sense of identity with our surroundings, where there is nothing outside the mind of man, or something identical with the mind of man”” (Everden, 1996, p. 98).



4 David Wood writes of Derrida's argument: "The future is essentially a contest zone. It is important to remain open to the incalculable, and the unexpected, but it is at least as important to cultivate the institutions and the civic leadership that will take responsibility for a not so very incalculable future" (Wood, 2006, p. 282).

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